

# *Sketch*

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## The Tick

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## W. C. JUMPER AWARD WINNER

### The Tick

by Campbell Cloar  
English, 6

THE day looked like a picture in Jenny's crayon book. There was the barn and some fluffy little chicks running over the land—our land stretching in the background. She had colored the land brown, because it had been plowed for spring planting. The barn was red; the chicks were blurry, yellow smudges. The day looked like this picture.

I called Michael. He rides his bike out on the land, a dot against the horizon. He points his bike away from the lopsided, often dirty houses in the city. We are just out of the city. If we look straight ahead, and not backwards, we see everything to prove we're in the country—sweeping flat, brown land, and Michael out there on his bike.

Sometimes Michael is so far away that I can't see anything of him.

"Michael!" I called through the electric bull horn. "Michael, dinner in fifteen minutes." Jenny had wanted to call her brother herself. She likes to use the horn. However, I was a bit upset with Jenny that evening, and called Michael myself. You see, she wouldn't go into her father's room to get the horn. It's ridiculous, I know, but the way the shadows fall in there gives her the creeps. Alexy comes home and laughs about it when I tell him. He can be understanding, because he has his dislikes, too.

Michael and Alexy came into the house together. Alexy's long face was tired; his gangling body tense. I touched his arm and kissed his cheek. Michael smirked at little Jenny, who was proudly mixing her salad.

"Boy, she sure thinks she's big. Whoo. Making the salad."

"Mama! Make him **leave!**"

What a pair. As unlike in ways as in their bodies. And born but a year apart.

Alexy and Michael sat down. Alexy asked for salad. Alexy always knows what to say to his children. Jenny nearly spilled her salad, proudly lifting it to him. I handed him the blue cheese dressing.

"This is fresh made also," I smiled, pointing to the dressing bowl, trying to catch his eyes. They were tired.

"Work?" I wanted to know. His face was not responsive. He bent to his fork and stuffed salad into his mouth, winking at Jenny.

"Did you get all the corn seed planted in one day?" I again tried. His big hands finished working with the salad. He pointed to the fish in the open oven. I began serving the baked fish and muffins. I placed corn on the table.

Alexy looked at me. "Myrtle," he said, "Janko's crop isn't even started." Alexy speared some fish.

"How come old Janko's crop isn't started, Alex?" said Michael, swallowing his last bit of salad.

I saw my grim mouth in the chrome on the stove. Alexy insisted Michael call him by his first name, no matter what I said. Alexy knew what I was thinking and frowned. He swallowed, glancing at me, gulping his tea. The screen door banged open, then shut. Shep came padding in. Though we were at the table **eating**, Michael and Jenny patted him.

"Please, don't pat Shep while you're eating," I asked.

"Myrtle," said Alexy, "Janko doesn't have the capital to get started this year. The directors at the bank won't back him."

"Janko's always been dirt poor, right, Alex?" Michael asked.

Alexy nodded. He looked towards the dog. "Come here, Shep. Come on, boy."

I bit my fish and started chewing slowly. Alexy's big hands turned and searched through Shep's shaggy fur. Now we all ate. There was silence except for eating sounds. Michael kept an eye on Alexy, trying to copy him.

I relaxed, looking at everyone. Alexy was eyeing me funny.

"Say, Mike," spoke Alexy. "Your dog has ticks on him. Did you know that?"

They both smiled and looked at me. I stopped chewing my fish. I wiped my mouth and pushed away my plate, not looking at anyone. Alexy popped up, running his large hairy hand through Jenny's dark head and tickling her ear, whispering something. She giggled. Mike giggled. Alexy winked and reached into his pocket. Now he made me look at his hand. In it was a **Chiefton** match box, and then he slid it open, making me see five big ticks. I screamed and drew back. Their eyes exploded in laughter.

"They're from Shep, Myrtle," said Alexy. "He's got ticks."

Alexy handed Michael the match box.

"Alexy, please. Don't give my boy ticks."

Alexy pinched me with his big hand. "Pets, Myrtle. He promises to keep them in the box."

I went to my bedroom still shuddering. Outside, through my window, I saw the final darkness come. I opened the window, resting my elbows on the sill.

I guess I dozed off. It was quiet when I awoke. Then there were voices out front. I could feel the breeze fresh and spring smelling on me. It was a bit chilly. The voices were Michael's and Alexy's. I pulled my robe around me, wrapping my arms around myself. My door was cracked; a slice of light streamed in yellow from the hall.

"Mama?"

The door pushed open. Jenny stood there with her ebony black hair falling about her naked body.

"Honey," I said, "why are you running around like that? It's chilly. What time is it?"

"I don't know."

"Come on." I led her by the hand back across to her room and we pulled on her nightie.

"Daddy and Michael are sitting outside in their shirtsleeves," she said accusingly. "I can't go to bed yet."

"What time is it?"

"I don't know. Can't we make a yellow cake with chocolate icing for Daddy?"

"We might."

I walked back to my room. My clock had stopped ticking. I walked to the screen door and peeped out. Two backs were visible, sitting on the front steps.

"Alexy?"

They started. Alexy turned around, looking hard at Jenny, then seeming more relaxed.

"Chilly, ain't it?" I smiled.

"A bit."

"What time is it?"

Alexy pulled out his watch. I could hear it.

"Nine-thirty."

"Want a yellow cake tonight?"

"Might be good." He thumped Michael. "Might be good, Mike. Right?"

"Sure, Alex." Michael turned his head so that the porch light caught the side of his face.

I jerked backwards, screaming. Alexy half stood up, questioningly. My boy was ten feet from me, but I could see it when the light hit him. I opened the screen door to get closer. I pointed.

"What?" Alexy looked confused. Then he saw. Just above Michael's eye, right over the brow, a tick. Alexy saw. He took hold of Michael's head, turning it to look. Michael had frozen still; then he tried to squirm away, saying,

"What? What's wrong, Alex?"

"Hold still here, boy. It's not as bad as that, but you know how your mother hates ticks."

Michael froze again. "Tick? Do I have a tick? Get it off!"

"Mommy, does Michael have a tick?"

"Alexy, please." I held Jenny by the shoulders. "I told you this would . . ."

"Aw Myrtle, please. Turn here, boy. Be a man."

The tick was already dug in. Alexy started to get something from his pocket, then stopped half way through and looked at my face.

"Go on. What about my yellow cake? Go on and fix it."

"No. I want Michael to be all right first."

"Look, you're just scaring him. Go on and it'll be all right."

I stood there with Jenny.

"Go on." He looked in my eyes. "Take Jenny away from here."

It was eleven o'clock before it was ready, and I called Alexy and Michael. Michael had a round band-aid above his eyebrow. I shuddered.

The cake was still warm when I cut it. We had milk with the cake. Michael gulped his down. He wanted another piece.

"Not tonight," I said. "It is too late to be eating much cake." But Alexy was in a mood to contradict me.

"Please cut Michael another piece," he said sternly. I cut him a thin slice and slid it onto the plate. Alexy grabbed my arm in his big hand and hurt me. I dropped the knife. Alexy picked it up and cut a bigger hunk, dropping it onto Michael's plate. Michael hunched over it, gulping. I pressed my napkin to my eyes and got up.

"Jenny, please come to bed," I said.

"She stays." Alexy didn't look at me.

From my bed I could hear them talking low. Warm air touched my face from the open window. There was the dry rustling of crickets. Now I heard a siren from the city, wailing unsteadily over the land between us. Could it be an ambulance?—or perhaps the police? We don't live far from the city. Everything in front of our house would prove that we are in the country. I began to worry about letting Michael ride so far out. The boy was continually putting distance between himself and this house. And those ticks. I wondered what had really happened with Alexy that day. Alexy isn't a bad man. He never hurt my

arm before. But that night he was just not being Alexy.

I may have slept before I heard the door to Jenny's room across the hall. It seemed to me that the breeze which brushed my face was cooler now, and I couldn't hear the crickets. I could not tell what time it was, because my clock had stopped—at five-thirty, I think. I hoped Alex would come in for a few minutes, but everything was silent. He must have gone to bed already.

The dry rubbing began again. Crickets. It seemed to me that bedsprings sounded, as if someone were changing positions. And then I must have slept, because a thudding noise awoke me. I know I had slept because it was almost dawn outside. I was startled and turned on my little light. Alex came in. He didn't say anything. He got in my bed and pulled me to him.

"Alex, please. Let's talk now."

But he pulled me to him and I could feel his hands.

"Be quiet," he said, because I was whimpering.

"Please, Alexy, don't." I closed my eyes and remembered his big hands—where they had been that night—and I remembered the land, and Michael a dot far off. And I think I called out to him, using the electric bull horn. When I opened my eyes I could see Alexy's ear and the nape of his neck. My body felt numb. I shut my eyes. Just outside the line of his hair was a tick. I was pushing, pushing, **pushing** him. Ohhh. His neck was right near my nose. I turned my face.

Finally he rolled away, looking at me doubtfully. I moved away from him.

"Alexy."

"Hush, woman."

"What happened today, Alexy?"

He rolled away and got out of bed.

"Tell me, Alex."

But he walked away—towards the shadows of his room—the black dot on his neck, and it seemed to me that my eyes unfocused. Everything blurred. The air was cooler on me now. I turned my face to the window, to the coolness, and suddenly the land flooded the space in my

brain where Alexy's sharp face had been. On and on it went, barren and brown. I could see its outline: the horizon, far off, with the sun rising behind it. Another day was come, and Alexy wouldn't tell me what the last one had brought. I lay in the glow of my little light. It seemed that I could see, as the sun rose higher, a black dot moving slowly against the horizon. Slow determination. Michael. The dot roved doggedly across the plain. I watched it. Slowly it roamed to the far side of my window. Then it turned and started across again, reversing to wobble for awhile in the opposite direction. I let my eyes follow it, back and forth. The rising sun had grown brighter, had risen higher, had finally lit through my window onto my breasts. A little black dot lay between them, and I looked from it to Michael, and back. The sun rose higher and the land turned rosy, rough, all varied . . .

"My God," I thought, "there is so much we might do with this land!"

And I got up and ran naked towards Alexy's room, bearing the tick. He had just stuck a round band-aid near the nape of his neck, and was sliding the matchbox shut as I came in.